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# Carsey: Rural Americans Divided On Environmental Views

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DURHAM, N.H. - Reflecting the heterogeneous nature of rural America, rural Americans are divided  $\frac{1}{2}$  primarily along religious lines - on their perspectives of environmental conservation and climate change, a new brief from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire finds. And as rural voters and environmental issues become key issues in the upcoming presidential election, this religious divide presents a challenge to political candidates.

"Rural voters, who are more often evangelical, may see the effects of global warming and other environmental issues first-hand, given how central natural resources are to their livelihoods," says report author Michele Dillon, a senior fellow at the Carsey Institute and professor of sociology at UNH. "Yet we found that born-again Protestants tend to be the least likely to perceive the effects of global warming."

Dillon and co-author Megan Henley analyzed data gathered in 2007 from the Carsey Institute's research on Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA). That research surveyed 7,842 residents of 19 rural counties across the U.S. and found four major profiles of rural America: amenity-rich communities, declining resource-dependent communities, chronically poor communities, and communities transitioning between declining resource-dependent and amenity-rich (see "Place Matters: Challenges and Opportunities in Four Rural Americas" at [http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/Report\\_PlaceMatters.pdf](http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/Report_PlaceMatters.pdf)).

This brief, called "Religion, Politics and the Environment in Rural America," found that rural Americans are far more likely to be Protestant (59 percent) than Catholic (16 percent), except in the Northeast; and that nearly two-thirds of those Protestants (63 percent) are born-again Christians. Born-again Protestants are especially prominent in chronically poor communities, where they comprise 63 percent of the population, and declining resource-dependent communities (38 percent).

The brief finds rural Americans to be quite divided on environmental issues. Asked whether it is more important to use natural resources to create jobs or to conserve natural resources for future generations, 29 percent favor job creation, 43 percent favor conservation, and 28

percent said both priorities should be weighed equally. Born-again Protestants were less likely to favor resource conservation (40 percent) than other rural Americans, particularly Catholics (49 percent) and unaffiliated (48 percent). Born-again Protestants are also significantly more likely than other rural Americans to say that urban sprawl and global warming have no effects on their communities.

The divide between born-again Protestants and other religious affiliations on the effects of sprawl and global warming is even more pronounced in declining resource-dependent communities (concentrated in Appalachia and the Midwest), where 59 percent of born-again Protestants see no effect of global warming, compared to 50 percent of non-evangelical Protestants. "There seems to be a confluence of experiencing decline and being born again that is particularly antithetical to perceiving environmental threat," says Dillon.

Noting that born-again Protestants are more likely to identify with the Republican Party, the brief suggests that Republican candidates will benefit from heeding the environmental views of this group. Yet other rural Americans, particularly those living in amenity-rich areas, are more likely to represent pro-environment views, presenting a challenge for political candidates.

"There's no obvious way John McCain can have an environmental policy that appeases both groups," says Dillon.

To download a copy of the report, go to <http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/publications/IB-ReligionPolitics08.pdf>.

*The Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire conducts research and analysis on the challenges facing rural families and communities in New Hampshire, New England, and the nation. The Carsey Institute sponsors independent, interdisciplinary research that documents trends and conditions affecting families and communities, providing valuable information and analysis to policymakers, practitioners, the media, and the general public. Through this work, the Carsey Institute contributes to public dialogue on policies that encourage social mobility and sustain healthy, equitable communities. The Carsey Institute was established in May 2002 with a generous gift from UNH alumna and noted television producer Marcy Carsey. Visit us online at <http://carseyinstitute.unh.edu/>.*

